

Ervin expected to take over leadership of Montgomery County Council

Next governing body to tackle budget decisions almost immediately

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

The next Montgomery County Council will not be sworn in until Monday, but most of the decisions about its leadership already have been made.

And with few exceptions, it seems the transition will be smoother than last year's, when the council abandoned a decades-old tradition by bypassing then-council Vice President Roger Berliner for council president.

In a split vote in December 2009, the council elected Nancy M. Floreen as council president.

This year, council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring appears unchallenged, and is expected to be elected president on Tuesday, the day after the new council's term begins.

Ervin said Monday that Berliner is likely to be the council's next vice president.

Berliner said he jokes that he "campaigns on his experience" in the position.

His election as vice president is largely a way to make up for the votes against him a year ago, and to put that part of the council's history behind, he said.

This time, Berliner said, he is confident that he will make the transition from vice president to president when it is his turn in 2011.

"I think last time was a unique set of circumstances," Berliner said Monday. "I am confident that in the absence of truly extraordinary circumstances, that if I am elected vice president that in the following year I will serve as president."

Other council leadership positions also have been decided, but will be made official Dec. 7, council members said Monday.

The council's two outgoing members, Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown and Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda, chaired arguably the council's two most powerful committees.

Knapp was chairman of the council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee, a position that Floreen will hold in the next council. Trachtenberg took over

as chairwoman of the Management and Fiscal Policy committee after the death of Councilwoman Marilyn Praisner in 2008. Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring will chair that committee in the next council; it will be known as Government Operations and Fiscal Planning.

Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park said he unsuccessfully lobbied to chair the economic development committee. Elrich, who has never chaired a council committee, said he "very much" wanted a leadership position on this council.

His first-place finishes in the council's Democratic primary and general elections also show strong support for his positions, which he said should have been taken into account.

"The election pretty much says among the Democrats that my views are far more in sync with where people want to be," he said.

Elrich will remain a member of the Planning, Housing and Economic Development and Public Safety committees.

Berliner will chair the Transportation and Energy Committee, a position that has been held by Floreen.

Chairmanships of the council's other committees will remain the same, with Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg leading the Public Safety Committee; Ervin chairing the Education Committee; and Leventhal leading the Health and Human Services Committee.

New members

Since 2002, the council has had significant turnover, with four new members being elected in each of the past two elections — 2002 and 2006. Two special elections have been held since then — in 2008 and 2009 — to replace deceased members.

This year, the council gained two new members: Hans Riemer, a Democrat who will represent the county at-large, and Del. Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 15) of Germantown, who will represent District 2.

"The chemistry I don't think will change to the degree it was affected in the past two elections," Floreen said of the council's dynamic. "But then again, I have no crystal ball."

Ervin says this will be the first Montgomery County Council to have two black members — herself and Rice — a change that she says reflects the increasingly diverse demographics in the county.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, about 15 percent of the county's population is black, and another 11 percent are Hispanic. The results of the 2010 Census have not yet been released, but county officials speculate that the county has become more diverse.

"We have a council that we really can be proud of, that is a reflection of the community," Ervin said.

Rice, who served one term as a state delegate, said he will continue his focus on education and social services on the council, serving on the Education and Health and Human Services committees.

He also hopes to improve the relationship between the council and the county's state delegation, especially regarding communication, which the council has said is lacking.

Rierner will serve on the council's fiscal and transportation/environment committees, continuing a focus he had as a community organizer. Rierner was an early supporter of the planned Purple Line light-rail project and campaigned heavily on the issue during a failed bid to represent District 5 in 2006.

"What I'm interested in is how to bring jobs and housing into the county in a way that doesn't overload the road with more cars," Rierner said Monday.

Rice, who was packing his Annapolis office Monday, said much of the next council's work will be on the budget.

This year, the council filled a \$1 billion shortfall in the fiscal 2011 budget. The council is expected to take up millions in budget cuts this month to help close a \$200 million gap in the current year.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) said he expects a better transition this year than four years ago, because the new council members are aware of the county's tight budget.

When he first took office as county executive, the council was not on board with many of his proposals for budget cuts, Leggett said.

In Rice's and Rierner's first few weeks, they will make decisions on budget cuts and hear recommendations from the county's Office of Legislative Oversight on how to get county spending under control.

"The budget decisions will really be trial by fire around here," Floreen said of the decisions new members will have to make almost immediately. "Usually you're not asked to address things you said in the campaign trail immediately after being sworn in. Usually you get a couple of months or a year or something like that."

Council roles

Ervin says the new council already is beginning what appears to be a smooth transition.

The new council held an organizational retreat Nov. 15 to get acquainted and offer some guidance to the two new members.

Part of Ervin's role as council president will be to work with Leggett. While the pair has had a somewhat strained working relationship in the past, Ervin says she does not anticipate a contentious year.

"There are times that I voice an opinion about an action, and I don't think it's well received, but I don't feel any friction the other way," she said. "I look forward to working with [Leggett]. I don't think that will be a problem."

Leggett agreed, saying that he believes too much has been made of tension between himself and Ervin.

Ervin said she also will work to build unity on the council and remind members that they are not "nine separate entities all on their own separate agendas," but rather nine people representing one body.

That message could be lost, however, as speculation begins over which council members are considering a run for county executive in 2014. Ervin has been mentioned as a possible candidate, but on Monday she said that "only time will tell."

"To me, four years might as well be a decade from now," Ervin said. "I know there are people who have their eyes on that prize in four years. But for now, members of the council are just ready to do the job they were elected to do."